



## Conference

### New Systems Theories of World Politics

Friday, September 30-Saturday, October 1, 2005



#### Papers Presented:

**Barry Buzan**, ["New Systems Theories of World Politics: The English School "](#)

**Daniel Nexon**, ["Structural Realism and the Problem of System Transformation"](#)

**Christopher Chase-Dunn**, ["Upward Sweeps in the Historical Evolution of World-Systems"](#)

**William Thompson**, ["The Evolution of Leadership Long-Cycle Thinking"](#)

**Ryan Goodman and Derek Jinks**, ["Causal Mechanisms and Systems Theory in International Relations: Insights from Sociological Institutionalism"](#)

**George Thomas**, ["Differentiation, Rationalization, and Actorhood in New Systems and World Culture Theories"](#)

**Friedrich Kratochwil**, ["Ruminations about Systems"](#)

**Bear Braumoeller**, ["Equation-Based Approaches to Systemic Modeling"](#)

**Lars-Erik Cederman**, ["Complexity and World Politics: Resurrecting Systems Theory"](#)

**Mathias Albert**, ["Modern Systems Theory and World Politics"](#)

**Hans-Martin Jaeger**, ["Modern Systems Theory and/as Historical Discourse Analysis"](#)

The **New Systems Theories of World Politics** conference took place Friday, September 30 – Saturday, October 1, 2005, at the Mershon Center. Organized by Mathias Albert (World Society Studies, Bielefeld University, Germany), Lars-Erik Cederman (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich, Switzerland), and Alexander Wendt (The Ohio State University), the conference included twelve papers and six panels. All of these papers addressed systems level politics, but they represented a wide variety of approaches. In fact, the main purpose of the conference was to convene scholars who study the same phenomena but rarely interact or collaborate.

The conference organizers had asked participants to keep five questions in mind throughout the weekend, hoping that answers to these questions would facilitate building bridges among very different approaches within systems theory research. These five coordinating questions were: 1) How do you define "systems" theory, and what do you see as its relationship to micro- or unit-level theorizing? 2) What are the principal contributions, both theoretical and critical, of your preferred approach to systems theory? 3) What are the principal limitations and/or horizons, if

any, of your approach? 4) What do you see as the relationship between your approach to systems theory and other approaches? and 5) Where should systems theory research in your tradition go from here?

While most of the papers presented at the conference served as examples of different strands of systems research, several were intentionally framed around the five coordinating questions, and all of them generated discussion over the trade-offs and possible points of contact among the different approaches.

**Barry Buzan** (London School of Economics) presented ideas from his paper, "New Systems Theories of World Politics: the English School," in which he answered the five coordinating questions with respect to his preferred approach, the English school of international relations. In discussing how different approaches might interface with each other, he said that the English and Stanford schools, two prominent approaches in international relations, remain quite separate, despite their shared object of study. The only point of contact, Buzan contended, is an attention to history – historical context and processes.

One of the differences between these approaches is that they employ different understandings of society in their models of systems level phenomena. The English school uses a strong sense of society as shared identity, while the Stanford school focuses on society as interactions among individuals. Buzan encouraged scholars to pay more attention to "second order societies," which are societies of collectivities of individuals, rather than as societies composed of atomized individuals.

**Dan Nexon** (visiting scholar at the Mershon Center and assistant professor at Georgetown University), spoke second. In his paper, "Structural Realism and the Problem of System Transformation," Nexon asked the question, how can theories account for when societies tend away from balance of power or anarchy and toward hierarchy? Nexon's paper and talk addressed how elements of culture might be added to Kenneth Waltz's structural theories in order to account for hierarchy. He said that culture can be integrated into Waltzian theory, as long as it is consistent with structural realist assumptions. Nexon used the example of Genghis Khan's construction of the Mongol empire to illustrate how universalistic authority can be strategically used to make and stabilize hierarchy.

**Christopher Chase-Dunn** (University of California – Riverside) spoke about his preferred approach, which he calls "comparative world systems." Chase-Dunn advocated an approach that focuses on institutions materials, e.g. nature and social institutions, and the links among them. Money and families, for example, are both institutions, which allow people to cooperate with one another. Chase-Dunn said that one advantage to a comparative world systems approach is that he can choose to study smaller level systems comparatively, defining the boundaries of systems by identifying interaction networks. Chase-Dunn's paper addressed how the scope of systems and networks changes over time, arguing that processes of expansion and increasing complexity proceed in cycles characterized by occasional upward sweeps to higher levels, resembling a stair-step pattern.

In his talk, **William Thompson** (Indiana University) argued that the field of IR systems theory should move in a more historical direction, because the most pressing object of study is how systems change over time. His paper, "The Evolution of Leadership Long-Cycle Thinking," addressed the five coordinating questions of the conference, relating his leadership long cycle research program to other systems approaches. Thompson said that leadership long cycle research is largely characterized by closer attention to the most central actor – the leader – in world politics. This research approach also pays close attention to history, often applying evolutionary arguments to describe variation and development in leadership. Thompson said that sketching out basic processes is crucial to establishing systemic context, focusing on such phenomena as global wars, cycles of concentration and de-concentration, and the development of the economic system.

**Ryan Goodman** (Harvard Law School) and **Derek Jinks** (University of Texas School of Law) presented their paper, "Social Mechanisms and Systems Theory in International Relations: Insights from World Culture Theory." Goodman and Jinks expand the approach of world culture theory to discuss the relationship between organizations and cultural schema. They look at the decoupling of states from security, i.e. when states that do not need the security participate in such organizations as NATO. They said that power and functionalist theories, the usual core of world culture theories, do not suffice to explain the influence of institutions on actors' behavior. Goodman and Jinks offer an alternative theory of acculturation, a combination of coercion and persuasion. To illustrate the usefulness of this alternative, Goodman and Jinks examine education curricula cross-nationally and across time, looking at which courses are promoted in order to track a global understanding of what a modern state's purpose is in educating people.

**George Thomas** (Arizona State University) discussed his paper, "Differentiation, Rationalization, and Actorhood in New Systems and World Culture Theories" asking the question, what is the relationship between differentiation and rationalization? Differentiation is a key concept in systems theory, in which it is

often viewed as a master trend driving change. Rationalization, by contrast, emphasizes institutionalized cultural scripts and identities as paramount in explaining behavior. Thomas argued from the world culture perspective that rationalization is analytically prior to differentiation. He said that the process of professionalization is a good illustration of how rationalization occurs first. Differentiation predicts that increasing complexity in the world results in specialized tasks. In focusing on specialized institutions and leaving out culture, however, Thomas said that differentiation cannot account for certain cultural similarities spanning purportedly differentiated fields. Thomas said the key mechanism of the rationalization process is how people acquire identities, which invoke the constitutive scripts that culture provides.

**Friedrich Kratochwil** (European University Institute) presented what he called a non-paper, entitled "Ruminations about Systems," in which he discussed the five coordinating questions posed by the conference. Kratochwil argued that scholars of any theoretical predilection should not be looking for *the* scientific explanation for things, but rather accept that there may be forms of explanations without talking about causes. Kratochwil said that trying to get into the head of the decision maker is not very useful, suggesting we should accept that indirect evidence is appropriate for constructing on possible explanation of behavior. In terms of the universality to which systems theorizing often aspires, Kratochwil said that good work shows how universal is embedded in the particular.

In his talk, **Lars-Erik Cederman's** said that macro theory is needed to explain change, because micro theory, which focuses on individual behavior, is too myopic. He explained his approach, complexity theory, as a systemic, non-equilibrium theory that incorporates generative inferences (rather than causal laws) and endogenous (rather than exogenously determined) actors. In this way, complexity theory is different from microeconomic theory, which focuses on atomized actors. Cederman said that complexity theory is especially well suited to the highly complex and contingent systems level world. His paper uses complexity theory to model the distribution of war severity before and after the French Revolution.

**Bear Braumoeller** (Harvard University) presented his paper, entitled "Systemic Theory in the Macroeconomic Tradition." Braumoeller said that he aimed to create a spare model of the world system with his mathematical approach. Taking inspiration in constructivism, realism, and social choice, he created one model that synthesizes their theoretical contributions to systems level explanation. Braumoeller said that he looked at 19<sup>th</sup> century great powers behavior to create a model that incorporates actors (states), the societal elements that constituted the 19<sup>th</sup> century security environment, and the actions of states that impacted the system. Braumoeller said that his macro level approach should be able to identify interesting relationships that a more myopic approach cannot detect.

**Mathias Albert** discussed his paper, entitled "Modern' Systems Theory and World Politics," as a point of departure for introducing Luhmannian (for Niklas Luhmann, a German social systems theorist) theory of society. Luhmannian theory argues that world society is formed exclusively by communication. It is the communication among states and people that constitutes what we think of as society. Albert said that there is no reason why Luhmannian societal theorizing cannot coexist with agent-based theorizing, but theories emphasizing communication are especially helpful to studying conflict. Luhmannian theories permit (in fact, demand) an abstraction away from the units interacting, focusing on the interactions, themselves.

**Hans-Martin Jaeger** ( University of Central Florida – Daytona Beach ) also put Luhmannian theories of communication to use in his paper, "Modern Systems Theory and/as Historical Discourse Analysis." Jaeger looked at the founding period of the League of Nations , at the dusk of the first age of globalization, and at the second age of globalization in the early 1990s. He contrasted the two globalizing eras not with world order in mind, as non-Luhmannian theories would, but in terms of semantic differentiation. He said that globalization in the 1990s includes of "cushion" of notions of global community and consensus, which obscure the actual functional differentiation in the emerging world society.

Themes of discussion during the conference included the question of how attention to history may be useful in systems theorizing. Regardless of their approach, scholars agreed that consideration of temporality and trends is crucial to systems theorizing. They differed, however, in terms of how this consideration would be applied in theory. Conference participants also discussed how they might facilitate further interfacing among approaches. Can mathematical modeling approaches, for example, be taught to students trained in post-structuralism, and vice versa? Ultimately, the participants did not reach a consensus on how to bring the community of systems theorists closer together theoretically. A second meeting of the participants is slated for mid-2006.